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Short Subjects: Archives and the Teaching of History

Thomas T. Spencer
Indiana University

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SHORT SUBJECTS



FEATURES

ARCHIVES AND THE TEACHING OF HISTORY

In writing about the relationship and common interests shared by archivists and historians, scholars have focused primarily on research in archival repositories and the mutual concern for the preservation of valuable historical documents.¹ Little has been noted about the role archives can play for those who teach history. Besides presenting research opportunities for scholars, archives provide a classroom where students from grade school through college can study and learn history by using manuscripts, photographs, oral history transcripts, audiovisual tapes, and other archival material.²

Initiating a teaching program using archives requires cooperation between the archivist and teacher. The archivist needs an awareness of the goals and content of the course being offered, while the teacher must be informed of the documents and items available in local archives, historical societies, or museums that will be pertinent to the course. The burden of responsibility for promoting this relationship will most likely fall upon the archivists since, far too often, archives suffer from obscurity and lack of awareness by the general public. This article will focus on potential classes that can be conducted for elementary, secondary, and college level students and demonstrate the number of ways archives can play a useful and vital role in the teaching of history.

Because of their age, elementary school students from grades three through six will benefit least from the initiation to archives. Normally, young children do not have the maturity to appreciate archival documents, and devising teaching projects can be difficult. But some presentations are possible and involving children at an early age is important.

One way archives can be used successfully at this level is through frequent class tours and field trips to local archives, historical societies, or museums. This is done in some school systems, but it is seldom done with much frequency. Tours and visits acquaint students with the purpose and nature of archives by allowing them to view interesting archival documents, photographs, and memorabilia. Such visits are even more productive when they are coordinated with the subject content of the history course being taught. Presenting a course lecture or program in the archives, surrounded by pertinent documents and memorabilia, will likewise be more meaningful than if given in the school classroom. Coordinating such visits to coincide with the course being offered is not always possible--depending on the local repository--but knowing what holdings are available can be beneficial. Tours and presentations can also be used successfully for secondary school students.

Other potential projects for elementary and secondary school students are photographic and audio recording presentations. Visual images and sound recordings hold the attention of younger children and leave a lasting impression. By working together, archivists and teachers can use photographs and tapes that narrate a story or particular historical event. Events such as fires, disasters, or visits by prominent historical personalities are often well documented in many archives and local historical societies. Preparing a visual or audio presentation about these happenings, supplemented by whatever documents or memorabilia are available, can be successful. Assigning a brief writing exercise on these presentations or some aspect of the visit is an additional way young students may reflect on the relationship of archives and history.

Local history projects can be especially rewarding. The Georgia Department of Archives and History utilizes such projects to encourage elementary and secondary students and teachers to become involved in working in local history. By studying various primary sources that document community or family history, students are introduced to the rewards of historical research.³

Secondary and college level students offer even greater opportunities for teachers using archives in the teaching of history. One such project is research in archival collections. It may be assumed that most junior and senior high school students do not have the sophistication or abilities to make full use of manuscript collections, and no archivist would want irresponsible students using their material. But working on research projects that draw upon individual letters, photographs, oral history transcripts, or recordings can be productive for high school students when the project corresponds to course work then being covered in the classroom. Closely related to this research are essays that stress the historical significance of manuscripts, photographs, or materials students have examined in the archives. Research may be pursued, also, on the individual who wrote the letter or the person who appears in the photograph. These essays and assignments can vary in length and difficulty, depending on the abilities of the class, and they should coincide with the course material when possible.

Responsible and trustworthy students can undertake additional projects that are both helpful to the archives and to their personal historical understanding. Identifying photographs, indexing, item listing of individual manuscripts, and gathering biographical data and information for inventories and registers are useful and worthwhile projects for students. Not every high school student could be entrusted with such responsibility, but the potential does exist.

Other possible projects beneficial to students and archivists, especially curators of historical societies and museums, are photographic essays. Students with appropriate interests and abilities could be encouraged to photograph landmarks, historical buildings, or

well-known local individuals and prepare biographical or historical essays. If the photographs are of acceptable quality they could then be used to supplement the holdings of the archives.

High school and college students can be encouraged, too, to use oral history interviews. In archives where such programs are active, students might read transcripts and listen to tapes to discern the techniques and problems of such methodology. They may then be assigned interviews with family members or other select persons in order to give them firsthand experience. If such interviews are of acceptable quality and content, they may be used as part of the archives' oral history collection. Specific or general writing exercises should be assigned that challenge students to reflect on their introduction to archival research.

College students especially can undertake a wide variety of projects, and many colleges and universities have archival programs where such classes are initiated. Assigning papers and projects to be completed from research in manuscript collections is a good way to acquaint the student with the problems of historical research and methodology.⁴ It is an excellent way, too, for the archivist to promote little-used collections.

Perhaps the biggest advantage for the archives in utilizing college history students is that they can perform archival tasks. Responsible undergraduate students could index, do limited processing, make folder listings and other types of finding aids, and compile research for inventories and registers. These archival tasks teach them much about history and archives, as well as relate directly to the content of the courses they are studying in the classroom.⁵

The examples presented in this article are just a few of the ways archives may be used successfully in the teaching of history at the elementary, secondary, and college levels. In summary, such projects and programs depend upon the type of repository available in the community as well as upon the interest and cooperation of both the teacher and the archivist. More importantly, it requires a receptive attitude and imaginative thinking on the part of all involved to initiate such programs.

Utilizing archives in the teaching of history can do much to stimulate interest in students for both disciplines.

Thomas T. Spencer

NOTES

¹ See, for example, Philip D. Jordan, "The Scholar and the Archivist--A Partnership," *American Archivist* 31 (January 1968): 57-65; Alfred B. Rollins, Jr., "The Historian and the Archivists," *American Archivist* 32 (October 1969): 369-374; Robert C. Sharman, "The Archivist and the Historian," *Archives and Manuscripts* 4 (February 1972): 8-20; Walter Rundell, "Relations Between Historical Researchers and Custodians of Source Materials," *College and Research Libraries* 29 (November 1968): 466-476.

² A few articles have been written that make some reference to the use of archives in the teaching of history. See, for example, John Hope Franklin, "Archival Odyssey: Taking Students to the Sources," *American Archivist* 32 (October 1969): 375-381, and Howard B. Gotlieb, "The Undergraduate and Historical Manuscripts," *American Archivist* 23 (January 1960): 27-32.

³ Alice Knierim, "Center for Local History Education: An Outreach Program of the Georgia Department of Archives and History," *Georgia Archive* 10 (Spring 1982): 13-22.

⁴ This project proved successful at the Yale University archives. See Gotlieb, "The Undergraduate and Historical Manuscripts," 27.

⁵ For an analysis of one program using graduate level history students to perform archival tasks, see James E. Hansen II and John Newman, "Training History Students in Working Archives," *History Teacher* 13 (February 1980): 211-221.